

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

December 10, 2015

Ms. Carolyn Colvin
Acting Commissioner
Social Security Administration
6401 Security Blvd
Baltimore, MD 21235-0001

Dear Ms. Colvin:

The recently passed and signed into law Bipartisan Budget Act provides the Social Security Administration (SSA) with the authority to develop and implement additional demonstration projects to help disability applicants and beneficiaries return to work. As SSA begins to develop these new programs, we encourage you to work with Congress, congressional committees of jurisdiction, and experts and scholars that have offered recommendations to develop effective and innovative projects that will get people off of the disability rolls and back to work.

According to the Congressional Research Service the employment rate among working-age individuals with work-limiting disabilities has fallen from 24.4 percent in 1981 to 14.4 percent in 2013. Further, many disability beneficiaries are unlikely to return to work, and, in 2013, only 0.4 percent of all beneficiaries were removed from disability rolls due to employment. Due to the low return to work rates, it is essential that SSA work to first apply an efficient, consistent, and accurate disability determination, and we encourage the use of scientifically based assessments of residual functional capacity for each disability applicant at the initial stage of application.

We must also do more to help current beneficiaries return to work. Under the law, before any demonstration project is permitted SSA must report to Congress on the objectives of the demonstration project, the expected annual and total costs, and the dates on which the project is expected to start and finish. Congress and SSA have been provided with the unique opportunity to address this historically low return to work rate of federal disability beneficiaries, and it is important that we work together in these initial stages of development to ensure a successful end product.

In our view, SSA should explore innovative solutions that could deter individuals from relying on long-term disability benefits and support those willing and able to return to work. We encourage SSA to explore the use of partial or time-limited disability benefits accompanied by mental health services, behavioral interventions, and/or financial stipends that could support individuals in returning to and remaining in the labor force.

In the past, we have missed these opportunities to develop successful demonstration projects as noted by reports in 2004 and 2008 by the Government Accountability Office (GAO), which criticized SSA for its administration of demonstration projects for federal disability programs.

We encourage SSA to evaluate these demonstration projects using well designed field experiments that are randomized control trials (RCT), and to work with outside researchers, including academics and policy evaluation organizations, and utilize the scientific peer review system to design, implement, and analyze these projects. It is essential that we avoid the mistakes of the past and develop projects that will contribute to the policy debate and help discover the most effective solutions that will facilitate the ability of disabled individuals to return to or remain in employment. These efforts will allow them to live a more independent and rewarding life.

We urge you to provide us with a response to these concerns and share with us any of SSA's plans to develop and implement meaningful demonstration projects under this newly implemented authority. We look forward to working with SSA and thank you for your consideration of our request.

Sincerely,



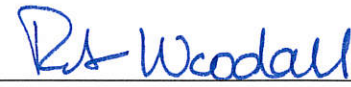
French Hill
Member of Congress



Tom Cole
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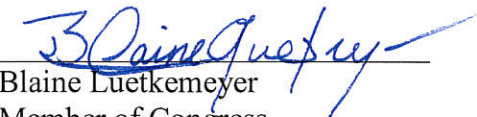
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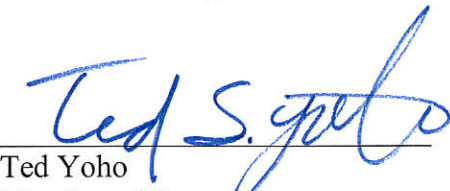
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